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Threats to Rural Society in the Czech Republic and its Future in the Context of Global Risks

Abstract: The aim of the article is to capture the current and future risks of development of the Czech countryside and the rural population. Through socio-economic analysis and study of technical documents, the authors try to determine the consequences and causes of the problems in the Czech countryside and describe the negative effects of their resolution, regardless of whether it is a factor of global or local character.

Keywords: Czech Republic, rural society, global risks, farmland, CLLD

Introduction

The changes in short and long term translate into shaping the character of contemporary Czech countryside. The current social structure in rural areas replicates economic changes related to the country's accession to the EU as well as changed patterns of social behaviour of the rural population that shape contemporary Czech countryside.

Models of social behaviour that characterise the developed Western countries are gradually spreading in the post-socialist countries – increasing the level of education of the population (including rural) as the result of organisation of life careers (both men and women), abandoning the model of marriage and increased share of children born out of wedlock, moving care for seniors outside the family, delayed readiness for taking up a job and long-term persistence in it or faster retirement. The consequence of these changes is the increasing average age of single men and women. It was, on average, 24.6 years (men) and 21.8 years (women) in 1989, while in 2014 it was already, respectively, 32.3 and 29.8 years. The average number of marriages during this period decreased from 7.8 to 4.3 per 1,000 marriage mid-year population (Czech Statistical Office, 2015). Significant changes have occurred in the expansion of cohabitation between unmarried couples, which is no longer seen as an expression of lower social status. This is evidenced by the fact that the number of births outside marriage has increased significantly, from 7.9% in 1989 to 46.7% in 2014. These and other changes in the family environment have inevitably affected the behaviour of patterns in value orientation of new generations, whose contribution to the stability of the Czech countryside is not only positive.

Rural population in figures

According to the methodology of the Czech Statistical Office (CZSO), as "rural" are considered municipalities with no more than 2,000 inhabitants and the village of 3,000 inhabitants with a population density of less than 150 inhabitants / km² (CZSO, 2009). The hallmark of the settlement structure of the Czech Republic is its fragmentation and the high density of settlements. The total number of municipalities in 2013 amounted to 6,253. Even for direct simplification the distinguishing criteria for defining rural areas at NUTS level 5, the proportion of rural communities in the total number ranges between 89 and 90%. On the other hand, less than 27% of the Czech population lives in these communities, although this share slightly increased in the observed period.

Table 1. Population in rural communities in the Czech Republic

Population in villages	2001		2007		2012		2013	
	Villages	Population	Villages	Population	Villages	Population	Villages	Population
To 99	548	38,881	529	37,230	471	33,639	464	33,140
100-199	1,113	166,214	1,062	157,333	997	148,212	997	148,389
200-499	2,041	663,416	2,019	656,020	2 017	658,207	2,012	657,282
500-999	1,280	893,592	1,307	913,985	1 366	962,918	1,356	953,571
1,000-1,999	652	903,757	685	950,291	727	1,017,529	742	1,031,212
Total rural	5,634	2,665,860	5,602	2,714,859	5 578	2,820,505	5,571	2,823 594
Total CR	6,258	10,230,060	6,249	10,287,189	6 251	10,505,445	6,253	10,516,125
Share [%]	90	26.1	89.6	26.4	89,2	26.8	89.1	26.9

Source: CZSO, 2014.

The number of people living in rural areas has increased since 2000 (especially in municipalities with more than 500 inhabitants); but urban population did not grow so quickly. This trend may be caused by migration and natality. Migration flows into the rural communities of over 500 inhabitants come from two directions.

The first direction is related to the long-term decline in population of municipalities under 500 inhabitants. The reason for their migration is the lack of job opportunities and poor basic civic services (health care, schools, public offices, etc.). Many residents have to decide whether to stay there and commute to cities (with increasing household expenses and worse possibility of development of social capital there) or to emigrate. The negative migration balance was subsequently manifested by, e.g. faster aging of the population of such villages, poor educational structure and deterioration in the quality of life of residents (Pělucha et al., 2006).

The second direction of migration is from larger cities to the countryside. This is caused mainly by searching for a new lifestyle and elimination of negative phenomena of living in the cities (anonymity, polluted environment and hectic linear perception of time among the urban population).

If we observe the rural natality from different perspectives, significant differences between rural and urban population are evident. The number of births outside marriage is generally lower in rural areas (the only exception are Karlovy Vary and Plzen regions). Rural areas are also characterised by lower divorce rate (and fewer marriages), higher number of births per woman, higher average number of household members, etc. The authors suggest that these differences (and not only these) are the reason for the higher growth in the rural population in the country.

The situation of agriculture in the Czech Republic is not different from other post-socialist countries in many ways. The reason for this is the transformation of the entire economic system and reduction of its economic importance. Even though there was a reduction in employment rate in the primary sector from 11.4% in 2001 to 6.5% in 2011, for rural areas in the Czech Republic the rate of employment in agriculture is still typically higher than the national average.

Lack of jobs is reflected in a higher level of commuting into the cities, which partially eliminates the deficiency. The proportion of economically active persons commuting to work outside their area of residence represents 70.7%, while for the population of urban areas it is just 25.3% (Pělucha et al., 2006). Improvement of this situation may contribute to the diversification of economic activities in rural areas, so that agricultural production does not represent the dominant source of job opportunities.

Table 2. Employment in sectors – rural / urban areas

Sector	2001			2011		
	Rural	Cities	Total	Rural	Cities	Total
Agriculture, forestry, fishing [%]	11.4	2.2	4.5	6.5	1.4	2.7
Industry, building [%]	43.8	36.9	38.7	37.4	30.4	32.2
Services [%]	40.6	56.6	52.6	44.4	57.3	53.9
Not found [%]	4.2	4.3	4.2	11.7	11.0	11.2

Source: Czech Statistical Office, 2011.

When we compare the income disparity between rural and urban areas we can identify other economic problems. For example, the monthly wage in rural areas reached levels of 86% of the national average in 2000. On the contrary, the average was exceeded by 15.2% in urban areas (Pělucha et al., 2006). This combined with the fact that rural households have more members (in particular they have more children with no income) also follows from differences in the average of expenditures per individual in the household – it is on average CZK 2,519 lower (CZSO, 2013). One explanation of the income disparity is evident under sizing of the tertiary sector and unfavourable age and educational structure of rural population, characterised by a higher proportion of economically inactive persons. In case of looking at the educational structure in rural regions, there is a higher proportion of people without education or with primary education and a lower proportion of tertiary educated inhabitants. A decline in the purchasing power of the population in the rural areas or the lack of investor interest is also reflected in the quality of transport services and amenities. The above-mentioned problems pose a potential threat to the

stability of settlements in general (Gajdos, Pašiak, 2008). The most vulnerable groups (and also the most affected by unemployment) are people over 50 years of age and women.

Income and expenditure structure of rural households

Different lifestyle of rural population (in comparison to urban), is also obvious in differences in the structure of household income and expenditures. The fact that residents of rural communities are forced to commute to work causes spending more on transportation (up to 14% of total expenditures) than people living in urban areas (9%).

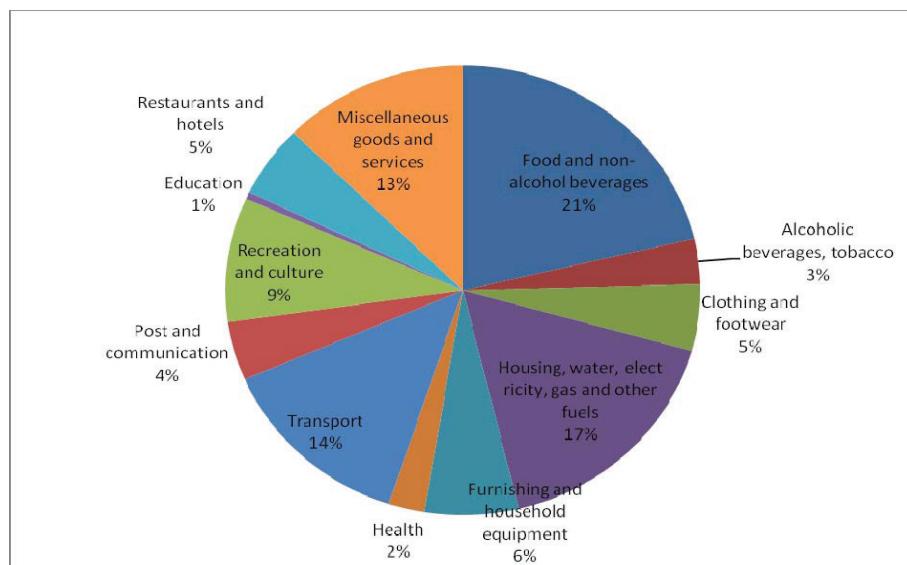


Figure 1. Structure of expenditures – a village of 1,999 inhabitants (2014)

Source: CZSO, 2015. *Vydání a spotřeba domácnostní statistiky rodinných účtů*. Retrieved from: <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/vydani-a-spotreba-domacnosti-statistiky-rodinnych-uctu-za-rok-2014-domacnosti-podle-postaveni-osoby-v-cele-podle-velikosti-obce-prijima-pasma-regiony-soudrznosti>.

In general, people living in urban areas spend more on housing (24% of total amount of expenditures in comparison to 17% in the municipalities up to 1,999 inhabitants). However, there is also one important fact – the structure of expenditure on housing is also different between urban/rural households (CZSO, 2011a). In the countryside there is a higher proportion of the population living in own home. There is also a higher proportion of consumption of electricity (70.8%) in rural areas, while in urban areas it is only 45.8 % of total spending on housing. The share of expenditure on rent forms in cities 37.7% (CZSO, 2011a).

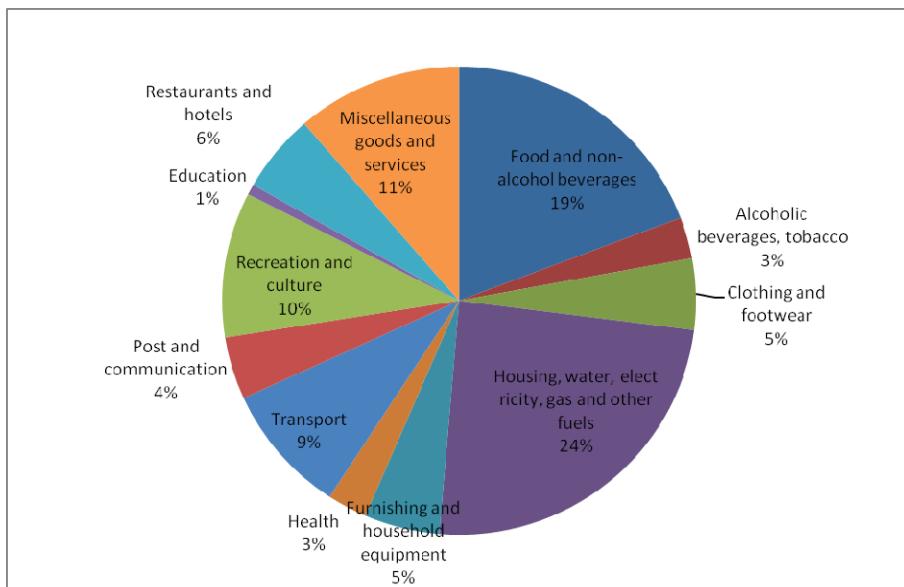


Figure 2. Structure of expenditures – a village of 50,000 inhabitants (2014)

Source: CZSO, 2015. *Vydání a spotřeba domácností statistiky rodinných účtů*. Retrieved from: <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/vydani-a-spotreba-domacnosti-statistiky-rodinnych-uctu-za-rok-2014-domacnosti-podle-postaveni-osoby-v-cele-podle-velikosti-obce-prijmova-pasma-regiony-soudrznosti>.

There are also apparent differences in expenditures on food and non-alcoholic beverages (rural households spend 21%, but the population living in cities only 19% of their average expenditure). However, in absolute terms rural households spend on food and non-alcoholic beverages less by an average of CZK 100, because they have their own farmland allowing them to produce some kind of food (e.g. fruit and vegetables).

Differences in income of households are mostly apparent on income level between the smallest municipalities with less than 1,999 inhabitants and cities with over 50,000 inhabitants. In absolute amount, the difference in the aggregate of all income components between these two categories was CZK 22,867. Difference in the level of income from employment was CZK 10,896 as well as in income from operations CZK 3,891 and other income components. The existence of income disparity of rural areas in comparison to the cities is evident. This fact can be obviously explained by less developed tertiary sector in the countryside (tertiary sector is characterised by higher average wage). Differences between categories of municipalities up to 1,999 inhabitants, 2,000-9,999 inhabitants and 10,000 to 49,999 inhabitants are not so significant. However, radically different lifestyle is obvious in case of population of large statutory towns, while the lifestyle of population in small towns has many elements that are similar to that of the countryside.

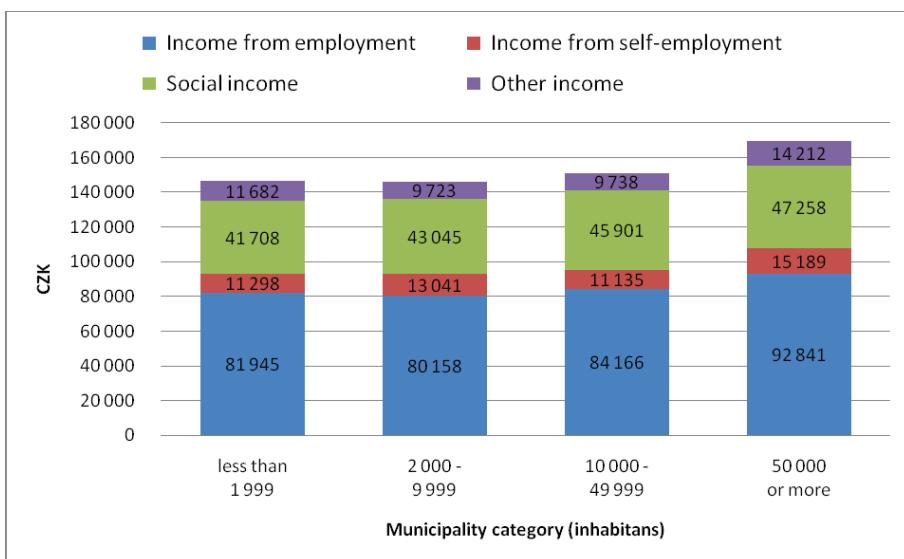


Figure 3. Gross cash income per year according to size categories of municipalities (2014)

Source: CZSO, 2015. *Vydání a spotřeba domácností statistiky rodinných účtu*. Retrieved from: <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/vydani-a-spotreba-domacnosti-statistiky-rodinnych-uctu-za-rok-2014-domacnosti-podle-postaveni-osoby-v-cele-podle-velikosti-obce-prijima-pasma-regiony-soudrznosti>.

Suburbanism as an example of a threat to rural life

There are many problems in communities with fewer than 500 residents. According to Bernard, the development of these municipalities should not be based on economic functions only, but also on improvement of all residential functions – i.e. improvement of housing, provision of basic services for the residents and securing the recreational functions (Bernard, 2011). However, the correctness of this position can be argued. Taking into account the extreme example of rural communities in suburban areas, which totally fail to fulfil the social function, we encounter a number of difficulties arising in these areas.

Rural population living in suburban areas is characterised by many socio-economic differences in comparison to the rural population remote from urban area as well as urban population. Residential function is closely connected with intensive housing construction. This fact, together with the fact that almost all economic activities of residents goes beyond those sites, creates new features of the local society. Lifestyle, education and age structure is completely different, not only in comparison to the town, but also in comparison to distant rural populations – in the monitored indicators, the values are in the middle (CZSO, 2009). Lack of economic activity on site forced residents to go to nearby major centres not only for work but also for services, including health

care, education, public offices or for leisure activities. The community life is very often not developed there and we can describe the creation of a “rurban” society or “bedroom communities” (Dinič et al., 2016) which lost the most of the benefits of typical urban or rural life. This extreme case is also leading to the question whether there is a rural community? And if we answered no, can we say that this new kind of society can be considered as urban?

Therefore, if we want to solve the problems of small rural communities, it is not sufficient to support only residential function of these areas. It is necessary to support complex solutions (both economic and social) and sustainably increase the quality of life of their residents.

Migration from cities to the countryside in the last 15 years profits not only the rural villages over 500 inhabitants, as mentioned above, but also rural villages in the hinterland of big cities, regardless of the number of population. In the former case, there is a chance that population growth brings higher education, new innovative methods to solve social problems with positive economic, social or environmental effects. But then, suburban areas cannot currently talk about migration as the beginning of positive trends for rural development. The authors are rather inclined to scepticism based on the fact that the lack of social and community life can become a cause of extinction of such villages.

Relationship to the land as the key factor

Due to the changing situation in urban and rural areas it is no longer true that higher proportion of agricultural land is typical for countryside. For example, we can find higher share of farmland in urban areas in regions of western Bohemia or the north and east Moravia (CZSO, 2013). Size, quality and function of farmland has been always changing.

It is alarming that currently, on average, 12 hectares of arable land are disappearing per day in the Czech Republic (Ministry of Agriculture, 2013). A similar trend can be also found in countries of the “Visegrad Four” (V4). The main factors reducing arable land in the Czech Republic are increasing intensity of housing development and occupation of land by photovoltaic panels and transformation of land management (e.g. afforestation). Not only low-quality land disappears but the phenomenon concerns also soils of higher classifications.

The quality of the farmland is not reduced only by its transformation into a different type of soil, but it is also the result of natural erosive processes and the actual economic activity of farmers. The Czech Republic ranks among the countries with the second highest percentage of leased farmland in Europe (this share was between 76-82 % in 2001-2013). Higher share of leased land in Europe is only in Slovakia (Gebeltová et al., 2014).

While studies confirm that the effective use of direct payments for growing crops brings economic effects for the tenants and the landlord (Ryan et al., 2001; Patton et al., 2008), it is necessary to take account of differences in relation to the soil. Maintenance of high soil quality has greater impact if it is managed directly by its owner (Low, Michal, 2003). Temporal lease and pressure on profitability for tenant means that their motives to maintain high quality of soil are lower than the owners. Tenants sought, through subsidies, for profitable and economic ways to increase the efficiency of their operations, which in practice means use of arable land for purposes other than just food production. A typical example may be the use of the soil for the production of biofuels or electrical energy by solar panels. Although there are obvious risks associated with the use of fossil fuels (both ecological and politico-economical), it does not prove that the production of biofuels solves this problem. It is rather leading to further soil degradation and to the erroneous thinking of young farmers about the soil. It is very similar to industrial entrepreneurs thinking about machinery – profitability is a key value for their decision-making processes.

There are also problems with the use of solar panels – their set up may seem as temporary at first glance. However, products of this type were never designed for use on arable land. There is a question whether farmland, on which panels are installed, will serve the future generations for food production.

Unbalanced relationship to the land, together with decreasing numbers of young farmers (not only in the Czech Republic), undermines the sustainability of agriculture sector as well as successful rural development (Kristensen et al., 2004).

Global risks for the rural community

The aforementioned pressures exercised by developers to acquire arable land for other than agricultural purposes or the emergence of suburban rural areas represent only a small part of the problems threatening the Czech rural society.

Another often discussed issue across European countries is food security. The Czech Republic is self-sufficient in a very few agricultural commodities. This fact is influenced by the subsidy policy of the EU and the Czech Republic as well as by changing agricultural commodity prices on national and international markets. Due to the unstable political and economic situation in the world there is a need to consider the subsidy policy goals and objectives of investment projects in agriculture. This situation opens the door for discussion about revival of self-sufficiency at national level, which is difficult and unprofitable from economic perspective in the short term, but it should bring positive effects in the long term.

Another global issue is a flexible domestic and foreign capital which extends also to the development of rural areas. The effort to break the limits on coal

mining in the Czech Republic should be given as an extreme example. The whole area of Jiřetín was paralysed by the very announcement of the intention (without confirmation of the approval) which brought social and economic problems – local residents gave up on further development of the area, pointing out that although the mining would not affect their locality directly, living next to a mine means the end of a peaceful life in a village. In addition, after the eventual approval of breaking the limits the stress on the environment will increase, not only in the place of actual mining. The problem lies in the fact that only 1/4 of mined coal in the Czech Republic is used for home heating and the rest is converted into electrical energy which is exported abroad. The extreme case opens the question whether the Czech society has the chance to defend themselves faced with the pressure of multinational developers and corporations. It is discussed whether rural regions will justify long-term and sustainable values before dictation of economic profitability (e.g. Moldan, 2003; Sklair, 2002; Suša, 2010).

Countryside and rural society could also turn some global negatives in their favour. Already mentioned the idea of self-sufficiency has the potential to bring to rural regions higher economic activity and society-wide prestige. Presented socio-economic and political crises like wars, threat of terrorism or the refugee crisis in media could also affect the public opinion about travelling abroad. According to GPI (Global Peace Index) the Czech Republic belongs to the 10 safest countries in the world (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015). It could contribute to strength the ideas of patriotism and also give rise to opportunities for the development of domestic tourism which also includes rural locations.

Rural society (and urban society as well) have to be ready for these opportunities for example through regional institutionalisation and support for bottom-up approach with regard that it is not possible to represent the countryside as a homogenous area.

Community development and local identity as a solution

The current approach of the CLLD (Community-Led Local Development), which has appeared in the new programming period of 2014-2020, responds to the above-mentioned and other problems of individual rural communities. Even in the scientific literature one can find an endogenous shift from an integrated approach to community-led development with emphasis on building social networks and relationships in localities. This can be based on two fundamental aspects. First, the leader has no chance to succeed without the support of the whole community in the area – it will force him to leave (sooner or later). And secondly, the community is responsible for the condition of the soil, landscape and rural areas which determines the quality of the above. The need to restore their relationship to the locality and its surrounding is presumed. In this context, it seems necessary to support regional and local identity.

Regional/local identity is an individual inner feeling of solidarity with the locality and can be considered as one of the key factors of regional development. This is a very complex phenomenon which has a range of social, territorial and cultural-historical aspects (Raagma, 2002). In this respect, it is questionable whether or not increasing globalisation processes can pose a potential threat to the independence of local cultures (Roubal, 2003). Ways to adapt these processes are on an individual basis rather differentiated. The subject of discussion is regional identity in the context of mobility, which leads to frequent updating of spatial self-identification in some cases, but sometimes there is an anchored regional awareness standing in opposition to the need for using the opportunities provided by the globalised world (Kováčová, 2003).

We are witnessing the emergence of new territorial units at the regional level, redefining the borders of the old regions and the emergence of new structures. There has been a reform of public administration in 2000 in the Czech Republic which established a system of higher self-governing units – regions. In this context, it is necessary to take into account that the process of institutionalisation of a region consists of several phases that they may, but not necessarily, be linked to (Sýkora, Matoušek, Brabec, 2011). According to the Paasi model of institutionalisation of a region (Paasi, 2002), it can be stated that these new territorial entities are not the result of a continuous and gradual process of institutionalisation but the result of reforms implemented top-down (Sýkora, Matoušek, Brabec, 2011). Although these regions have been already integrated into state regional systems, some of them lacked a clearly defined symbolic significance accepted by its own population. This can result from insufficient respect of bottom-up approach during the process of establishment of regions.

Successful development of LAGs (Local Action Groups), which cover 95% of the territory in the Czech Republic, and their activities based on a bottom-up approach, suggest that strengthening the role of the communities and their relationship to the area where they live, may be a very useful tool for resisting local and global threats.

Conclusion

The current rural population in the Czech Republic does not differ too much from the population living in post-socialist countries in the major indicators. Even after a quarter of a century of existence of the state of democratic governance, the negative phenomena of the period of totalitarian regime are not fully eliminated. However, individual analyses show that changes after 1989 have had a major impact on the contemporary Czech countryside.

Significant fragmentation of the Czech Republic in a small rural villages still persists. The smallest villages (up to 500 inhabitants) provide the lowest quality of life for local residents. This is reflected in continued deterioration of

the socio-economic characteristics including the overall decline of population. Only small villages in the hinterland of large cities are an exception. There is no decline in population, but these communities also failed to fulfil a different role except residential. The emergence of suburban rural settlements with all of the above-mentioned negative characteristics can be seen as a consequence of the impact of national and international interests of developers.

Rural population is affected by the lack of job opportunities so many of the residents, have to commute to nearby towns. This leads to waste of time on individual level that adversely affects social, cultural or sports activities in the community and limits the development of social relations.

Lower economic activity and a higher proportion of the primary sector in the countryside have apparently resulted in the creation of income disparity in comparison to the urban population. Broader diversification of economic activities of rural areas can contribute to its partial elimination.

Another key factor of the development of rural land and rural population is the relation to a farmland. Decreasing size and quality of the farmland is an example of the incorrect view of this indispensable resource development in the Czech society. Only a change in the mindset of existing and newly starting farmers and the rest of the society can contribute to the conservation of one of the most important stabilising factors in the development of the entire country.

In spite of these negatives, it seems that the different lifestyles of villagers do not lower the attractiveness of life in the Czech countryside. Population growth is not only a result of birth rate, but also a result of migration.

In order to maintain the attractiveness of the countryside in the future, it is necessary to strength the role of the LAGs in rural development further and encourage individuals and entire communities to deepen their relationship to the farmland, to the landscape and generally to the place where they live. Changes in the education process in the Czech society and following the examples of good practice should be exactly the factors that might be very useful in this respect.

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